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ABSTRACT

This study estimated the number of people searching the ERIC database each day. The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system designed to provide ready access to an extensive body of education-related literature. Federal funds traditionally have paid for the development of the database, but not the dissemination of the information. This model has precluded collecting accurate information about use of the database. Data from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) and two of ERIC's clearinghouses, the Clearinghouse on Information Technology and the Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation were used to make estimates of the number of users of the database as a whole. Referrals from these two clearinghouses accounted for 10.02% of the referrals to EDRS in September 2001. The estimate suggests that at least 86 million searches of the ERIC database will be conducted over the next year. This is more than seven million searches a month and more than 230,000 searches a day. This can be considered to be an average of more than 18 searches per year for each of the 4.7 million teachers, college of education professors, and college of education students in the United States. (SLD)

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How many people search the ERIC database each day?

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Based on September 2001 usage data, at least 86 million searches of the ERIC database will be conducted over the next year. This is more than seven million searches per month and more than 230,000 searches per day. Looked at another way, this is an average of more than 18 searches per year for each of the nation's 4.7 million school teachers, college of education professors and college of education students (Note 1).

Background

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system designed to provide ready access to an extensive body of education-related literature. Established in 1966, ERIC is a program of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and is administered by the National Library of Education (NLE) (Note 2).

At the heart of ERIC is the largest education database in the world -- containing more than one million records of journal articles, research reports, curriculum and teaching guides, conference papers, and books. Federal funds have traditionally paid for the development, but not the dissemination, of the database. Database development has occurred through the acquisition and cataloging activities of a decentralized network of subject-specific clearinghouses. Dissemination, it was felt, could best be handled by the private sector. The private sector could conduct research into user interfaces, mount the databases on high-speed computers, develop search engines, and host on-line searching. While the government could take pride in the investment and value-added services made by the private sector, the model precluded the attainment of accurate usage data. Multiple vendors held their usage data proprietary; there was no way to aggregate. With the

advent of ERIC on CD-ROM and the expansion of computing capabilities, it became even harder to obtain meaningful numbers.

Today, more than 100 organizations obtain the ERIC database and commonly provide access through CD-ROM products, university intranets, regional servers, on-line gateways, library cooperatives, and a few public access web sites. Fortunately, for the purpose of obtaining a reasonable estimate, many of the web-based servers are linked to the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) to provide on-line access to the full text of more than 86,000 recent documents through EDRS's e*subscribe program and a system to order print and microfiche copy of the non-journal literature in the ERIC database. Data from EDRS and two volunteer public-access points to the ERIC database provide the long-awaited data needed to make a reasonable estimate.

Analysis

Referrals from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation accounted for 10.02% of the referrals to EDRS in September 2001 (Dagutis, 2001, personal communication). Other frequent referrers were EBSCO, OVID, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, and OCLC. During the same time period, the logs for ERIC/IT and ERIC/AE showed 724,000 searches of the ERIC database. Assuming that the mean search/referral rate across linked sites is equal to the search/referral rate for ERIC/IT and ERIC/AE, the projection from this sample is 7,225,000 searches per month with a 95% confidence interval of +/- 57,000.

Discussion

The estimate does not include searches conducted using CD-ROMs or searches conducted at sites not linked to EDRS. Searches that result in documents with links to full-text resources or that result in full-text resources are also undercounted. The trend data from EDRS, ERIC/IT, and

ERIC/AE consistently show large increases in usage over the past year with every indication that usage will continue to increase. The estimate, therefore, is very conservative.

For the past 35 years, ERIC has sought to comprehensively catalog all print resources, including the journal literature, government and school district reports, evaluations, and conference papers. As a comprehensive database, ERIC has been in a position to well serve the entire range of audiences interested in educational information. The large numbers should not really be surprising.

The growth of the Internet was a blessing for the ERIC system. ERIC system activities other than archiving and database building became more visible and more valued, especially among practitioners. In recent years, usage has soared for ERIC Clearinghouse products and services such as pathfinders, responses to frequently asked questions, interactive web-based products, question-answering services, selection and identification of top resources, and syntheses. While use of the ERIC database is impressive, use of these other products and services is far more impressive. From April to June, 2001, ERIC Clearinghouse web sites averaged more than 70 million hits per month and only 30% of the users were college professors and students. Database usage of 7.2 million/month pales in comparison. While the database is ERIC's core, it is not its strength.

ERIC has long been the most visible and most used project funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (Stalford & Sterns, 1990; Rudner, 2000). But ERIC has been leveled funded for the past 30 years (Eisenberg, Henson, Howley, Cawley, Ramirez, and Rothenberg, 1997) and it has had basically the same scope of work during that time (Rudner, 2000). Yet ERIC's user based has changed radically over the past few years. Not only are there more users, but there are more direct users and their information needs are not the same as they were 30 years ago. The primary ERIC user base has shifted from the research to the practitioner community.

How can ERIC better serve the practitioner community? Practitioners are often interested in gathering data and information in order to guide decision making. Local evaluations, pre-selected literature, case studies, implementation guides, responses to FAQs have traditionally been valued by this audience. The ERIC project should fully explore the information needs and information-seeking behavior of the practitioner audience. If ERIC is going to expand it's service to that community, this will probably mean that ERIC should expand product and web development activities, provide more targeted resources, develop ways to identify and communicate quality, and offer more selection and organization of resources, more synthesis work, more pathfinders, and different database content.

Notes:

1) There are some 3,000,000 teachers (USDE, 2001), 1,590,000 College of Education students (USDE, 2000) and 89,000 College of Education professors (MDR, 2001).

2) More information about the ERIC program and the ERIC database can be obtained from http://www.eric.ed.gov/about/about.html

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